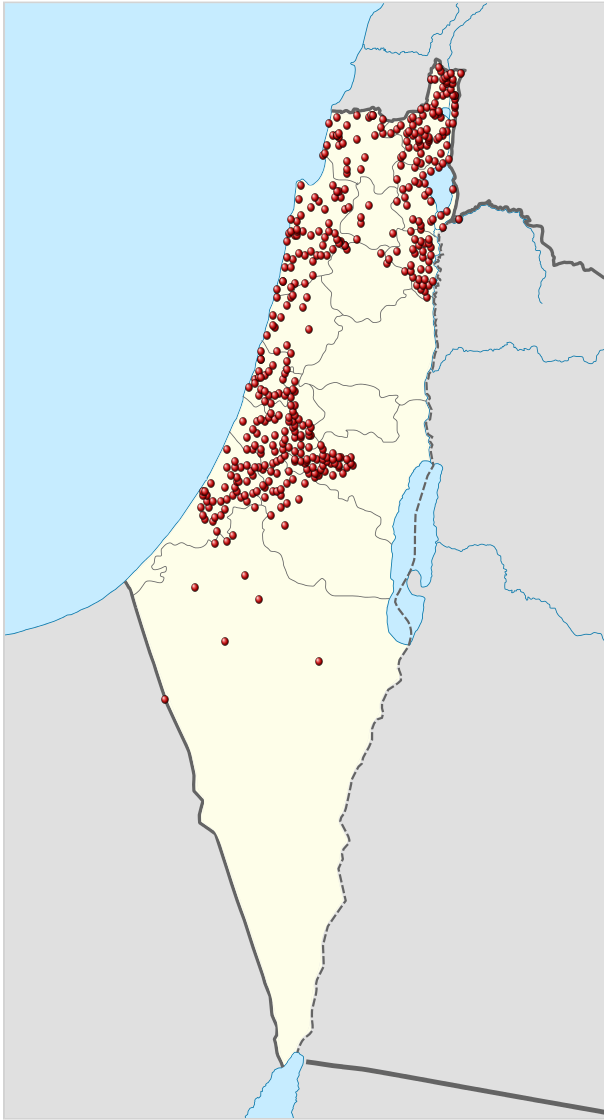
Nakba

The **Nakba** (Arabic: النكبة, romanized: *an-Nakbah*, lit. 'the "disaster", "catastrophe", or "cataclysm"'),[1] also known as the **Palestinian Catastrophe**, was the destruction of Palestinian society and homeland in 1948, and the permanent displacement of a majority of the Palestinian Arabs.[2][3] The term is used to describe both the events of 1948 and the ongoing occupation of the Palestinians in

the Palestinian territories (the occupied West Bank and the Gaza Strip), as well as their persecution and displacement in the Palestinian territories and in Palestinian refugee camps throughout the region.[4][5][6][7][8]

Clickable map of Mandatory Palestine with the depopulated locations during the 1947–1949 Palestine war.

The foundational events of the Nakba took place during and shortly after the 1948 Palestine war, including 78% of Mandatory

Palestine being declared as Israel, the expulsion and flight of 700,000 Palestinians, the related depopulation and destruction of over 500 Palestinian villages by Zionist militias and subsequent geographical erasure, the denial of the Palestinian right of return, the creation of permanent Palestinian refugees and the "shattering of Palestinian society".[9][10][11][12] The expulsion of the Palestinians has since been described by some historians as ethnic cleansing.[13][14][15]

In 1998, Yasser Arafat proposed that Palestinians should mark the 50th

anniversary of the Nakba declaring 15 May, the day after Israeli independence in 1948, as Nakba Day, formalizing a date that had been unofficially used as early as 1949.[16][17]

The Nakba greatly influenced the Palestinian culture and is a foundational symbol of Palestinian identity, together with "Handala", the keffiyeh and the symbolic key. Countless books, songs and poems have been written about the Nakba.[18] Palestinian poet Mahmoud Darwish described the Nakba as "an extended present that promises to continue in the future."[19][20]

Components

The Nakba encompasses the displacement, dispossession, statelessness and fracturing of Palestinian society.[2][3]

Displacement

During the 1947–49 Palestine war, an estimated 700,000 Palestinians fled or were expelled, comprising around 80% of the Palestinian Arab inhabitants of what became Israel.[21][22] Almost half of this figure (approximately 250,000–300,000 Palestinians) had fled or had been

expelled ahead of the Israeli Declaration of Independence in May 1948,[23] a fact which was named as a *casus belli* for the entry of the Arab League into the country, sparking the 1948 Arab–Israeli War.[24] In the period after the war, a large number of Palestinians attempted to return to their homes; between 2,700 and 5,000 Palestinians were killed by Israel during this period, the vast majority being unarmed and intending to return for economic or social reasons.[25] The expulsion of the Palestinians has since been described by some historians as ethnic cleansing.[13][14][15]

At the same time, a significant proportion of those Palestinians who remained in Israel became internally displaced. In 1950, UNRWA estimated that 46,000 of the 156,000 Palestinians who remained inside the borders demarcated as Israel by the 1949 Armistice Agreements were internally displaced refugees.[26][27][28] Today some 274,000 Arab citizens of Israel – or one in four in Israel – are internally displaced from the events of 1948.[29]

Dispossession and erasure

The UN Partition Plan of 1947 assigned 56% of Palestine to the future Jewish state, while the Palestinian majority, 66%, were to receive 44% of the territory. 80% of the land in the programmed Jewish state was already owned by Palestinians, 11% had Jewish title.[30] Before, during and after the 1947–49 war, hundreds of Palestinian towns and villages were depopulated and destroyed.[31][32] Geographic names throughout the country were erased and replaced with Hebrew names, sometimes derivatives of the historical Palestinian nomenclature, and

sometimes new inventions.[33] Numerous non-Jewish historical sites were destroyed, not just during the wars, but in a subsequent process over a number of decades. For example, over 80% of Palestinian village mosques have been destroyed, and artefacts have been removed from museums and archives.[34]

A variety of laws were promulgated in Israel to legalize the expropriation of Palestinian land.[35][36]

Statelessness and denationalization

The creation of Palestinian statelessness is a central component of the Nakba and continues to be a feature of Palestinian national life to the present day.[37] All Arab Palestinians became immediately stateless as a result of the Nakba, although some took on other nationalities.[38] After 1948, Palestinians ceased to be simply Palestinian, instead becoming either Israeli-Palestinians, UNRWA Palestinians, West Bank-Palestinians, and Gazan-Palestinians, in addition to the wider Palestinian diaspora who were able to achieve residency

outside of historic Palestine and the refugee camps.[39]

The first Israeli Nationality Law, passed on 14 July 1952, denationalized Palestinians, rendering the former Palestinian citizenship "devoid of substance", "not satisfactory and is inappropriate to the situation following the establishment of Israel".[40][41]

Fracturing of society

The Nakba was the primary cause of the Palestinian diaspora; at the same time Israel was created as a Jewish homeland,

the Palestinians were turned into a "refugee nation" with a "wandering identity".[42] Today a majority of the 13.7 million Palestinians live in the diaspora, i.e. they live outside of the historical area of Mandatory Palestine, primarily in other countries of the Arab world.[43] Of the 6.2 million people registered by the UN's dedicated Palestinian refugee agency, UNRWA,[a] about 40% live in the West Bank and Gaza, and 60% in the diaspora. A large number of these diaspora refugees are not integrated into their host countries, as illustrated by the ongoing tension of

Palestinians in Lebanon or the 1990–91 Palestinian exodus from Kuwait.[45]

These factors have resulted in a Palestinian identity of "suffering", whilst the deterritorialization of the Palestinians has created a uniting factor and focal point in the desire to return to their lost homeland.[46]

Terminology

The term Nakba was first applied to the events of 1948 by Constantin Zureiq, a professor of history at the American University of Beirut, in his 1948 book *Maᶜnā an-Nakba* (*The Meaning of the*

Disaster).[47] Zureiq wrote that "the tragic aspect of the Nakba is related to the fact that it is not a regular misfortune or a temporal evil, but a Disaster in the very essence of the word, one of the most difficult that Arabs have ever known over their long history."[1] Prior to 1948, the "Year of the Catastrophe" among Arabs referred to 1920, when European colonial powers partitioned the Ottoman Empire into a series of separate states along lines of their own choosing.[48]

The word was used again one year later by the Palestinian poet Burhan al-Deen al-Abushi.[1] Zureiq's students subsequently

founded the Arab Nationalist Movement in 1952, one of the first post-Nakba Palestinian political movements. In a six-volume encyclopedia *Al-Nakba: Nakbat Bayt al-Maqdis Wal-Firdaws al-Mafqud* (*The Catastrophe: The Catastrophe of Jerusalem and the Lost Paradise*) published between 1958–60,[49] Aref al-Aref wrote: "How Can I call it but Nakba? When we the Arab people generally and the Palestinians particularly, faced such a disaster (Nakba) that we never faced like it along the centuries, our homeland was sealed, we [were] expelled from our country, and we lost many of our beloved sons."[1]

Muhammad Nimr al-Hawari also used the

term Nakba in the title of his book *Sir al Nakba* (*The Secret behind the Disaster*) written in 1955. The use of the term has evolved over time.[50]

Initially, the use of the term Nakba among Palestinians was not universal. For example, many years after 1948, Palestinian refugees in Lebanon avoided and even actively resisted using the term, because it lent permanency to a situation they viewed as temporary, and they often insisted on being called "returnees".[51] In the 1950s and 1960s, terms they used to describe the events of 1948 included *al-'ightiṣāb* ("the rape"), or were more

euphemistic, such as *al-'aḥdāth* ("the events"), *al-hijra* ("the exodus"), and *lammā sharnā wa-tla'nā* ("when we blackened our faces and left").[51] Nakba narratives were avoided by the leadership of the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO) in Lebanon in the 1970s, in favor of a narrative of revolution and renewal.[51] Interest in the Nakba by organizations representing refugees in Lebanon surged in the 1990s due to the perception that the refugees' right of return might be negotiated away in exchange for Palestinian statehood, and the desire was to send a clear message to the international community that this right was non-negotiable.[51]

Since the late 1990s, the phrase “ongoing Nakba” (Arabic: النكبة المستمرة, romanized: *al-nakba al-mustamirra*) has emerged to describe the "continuous experience of violence and dispossession" experienced by the Palestinian people.[52] This term enjoins the understanding of the Nakba not as an event in 1948, but as an ongoing process that continues through to the present day.[53]

Israeli perspectives

Israeli officials have repeatedly stigmatised the term as embodying an 'Arab lie' or as a 'justification for terrorism'. In 2009, the Israeli Education Ministry

banned using 'nakba' in Palestinian textbooks for children. In 2011, the Knesset forbade institutions from commemorating the event. According to Neve Gordon, a school ceremony memoralizing the nakba would, under the 2011 law, have to respond to charges that it incited to racism, violence and terrorism, and denied Israel's democratic character, in doing so.[54] In 2023, after the United Nations instituted a commemoration day for the Nakba on 15 May, the Israeli ambassador Gilad Erdan remonstrated that the event itself was antisemitic.[55]

Israeli narrative

Many Jewish Israelis refer to the period of the Nakba as the birth of the state of Israel and their "War of Independence".[56] Jewish Israelis commonly perceive the 1948 war and its outcome as an equally formative and fundamental event – as an act of justice and redemption for the Jewish people after centuries of historical suffering, and the key step in the "negation of the Diaspora".[56] As a result, the narrative is extremely sensitive to the Israeli identity.[56] As one paper on the subject puts it: "Silence on the Nakba is also part of everyday life in Israel."[57]

State funding penalties for Nakba commemoration

In May 2009, Yisrael Beiteinu introduced a bill that would outlaw all Nakba commemorations, with a three-year prison sentence for such acts of remembrance.[58] Following public criticism, the bill draft was changed, the prison sentence dropped and instead the Minister of Finance would have the authority to reduce state funding for Israeli institutions found to be "commemorating Independence Day or the day of the establishment of the state as a day of mourning".[59] The new draft was approved

by the Knesset in March 2011.[60][61] The implementation of the new law unintentionally promoted knowledge of the Nakba within Israeli society, an example of the Streisand effect.[62]

In films and literature

Farha, a film about the Nakba directed by Jordanian director Darin Sallam, was chosen as Jordan's official submission for the 2023 Academy Awards International Feature Film category. In response, Avigdor Lieberman, the Israeli Finance Minister, ordered the treasury to withdraw government funding for Jaffa's Al Saraya

Theater where the film is scheduled for projection.[63]

Long-term implications

The most important long-term implications of the Nakba for the Palestinian people were the loss of their homeland, the fragmentation and marginalization of their national community, and their transformation into a stateless people.[64]

See also

- Haifa Declaration
- Jewish exodus from the Muslim world

- Farha (film)

References

Notes

a. *Note: The 6.2 million is composed of 5.55 million registered refugees and 0.63m other registered people; UNRWA's definition of Other Registered Persons refer to "those who, at the time of original registration did not satisfy all of UNRWA's Palestine refugee criteria, but who were determined to have suffered significant loss and/or hardship for reasons related to the 1948 conflict in Palestine; they also include persons who belong to the families of other registered persons."*[44]

Citations

1. *Honaida Ghanim (2009). "Poetics of Disaster: Nationalism, gender, and social change among Palestinian poets in Israel after Nakba". International Journal of Politics, Culture, and Society. Vol. 22. pp. 23–39. JSTOR 40608203 (https://www.jstor.org/stable/40608203) .*
2. *Webman 2009, p. 29: "The Nakba represented the defeat, displacement, dispossession, exile, dependence, insecurity, lack of statehood, and fight for survival of the Palestinians."*

3. *Sa'di 2002, p. 175: "for Palestinians, Al-Nakbah represents, among many other things, the loss of the homeland, the disintegration of society, the frustration of national aspirations, and the beginning of a hasty process of destruction of their culture."*

4. *Hanan Ashrawi, Address by Ms. Hanan Ashrawi (http://www.i-p-o.org/palestine-ashrawi.htm) Archived (https://web.archive.org/web/20210304060303/http://www.i-p-o.org/palestine-ashrawi.htm) 4 March 2021 at the Wayback Machine, Durban (South Africa), 28 August 2001. World Conference Against Racism, Racial Discrimination, Xenophobia, and Related Intolerances: "a nation in captivity held hostage to an ongoing Nakba, as the most intricate and pervasive expression of persistent colonialism, "apartheid, racism, and victimization" (original emphasis).*

5. *Saeb Erekat, 15 May 2016, Haaretz, Israel Must Recognize Its Responsibility for the Nakba, the Palestinian Tragedy (https://www.haaretz.com/opinion/.premium-israel-must-recognize-its-responsibility-for-the-nakba-1.5383272) Archived (https://web.archive.org/web/20210226042245/https://www.haaretz.com/opinion/.premium-israel-must-recognize-its-responsibility-for-the-nakba-1.5383272) 26 February 2021 at the* Wayback Machine, *"The two-part makeup of the Nakba was borne through the destruction of Palestine and the construction of Israel. It encompasses around 350,000 internally displaced Palestinian citizens of Israel. It is seen through a racist legislative framework which legitimized the theft of Palestinian*

refugee land as enumerated in the Absentee Property Law... For Palestinians worldwide, the Nakba was not merely a day in history 68 years ago, but an entire system of daily forced subjugation and dispossession culminating in today's Apartheid regime."

6. *Sa'di & Abu-Lughod 2007*, p. 10: "For Palestinians, still living their dispossession, still struggling or hoping for return, many under military occupation, many still immersed in matters of survival, the past is neither distant nor over. Unlike many historical experiences discussed in the literature on trauma, such as the Blitz, the merciless bombing of Hamburg and Dresden by the Allies at the closing stage of World War II, the Holocaust, the Algerian War of Independence, or the World Trade Center attack, which lasted for a limited period of time (the longest being the Algerian war of independence, lasting eight years), the Nakba is not over yet; after almost sixty years neither the Palestinians

nor Israelis have yet achieved a state of normality; the violence and uprooting of Palestinians continues."

7. *Manna' 2013, p. 87: "Contrary to what many think, particularly in Israel, the Nakba was not a one-time event connected to the war in Palestine and its immediate catastrophic repercussions on the Palestinians. Rather, and more correctly, it refers to the accumulated Palestinian experience since the 1948 war up to the present. After the Oslo agreements in 1993, there were hopes that the stateless Palestinian people would soon earn freedom and independence. However, the failure of the peace process to end the Israeli occupation and allow the birth of an independent Palestinian state alongside Israel pushed the Palestinians back to square one. Furthermore, the erup- tion of a new cycle of violence which began*

in September 2000 added new dimensions to the disintegration of Palestinian society. For many Palestinians, these more recent events are adding new chapters and new meanings to the long-lived catastrophe since 1948."

8. *Bashir & Goldberg 2018, p. 33, footnote 4: "In Palestinian writings the signifier "Nakba" came to designate two central meanings, which will be used in this volume interchangeably: (1) the 1948 disaster and (2) the ongoing occupation and colonization of Palestine that reached its peak in the catastrophe of 1948"*
9. *Masalha 2012, p. 3.*

10. *Dajani 2005, p. 42: "The nakba is the experience that has perhaps most defined Palestinian history. For the Palestinian, it is not merely a political event — the establishment of the state of Israel on 78 percent of the territory of the Palestine Mandate, or even, primarily a humanitarian one — the creation of the modern world's most enduring refugee problem. The nakba is of existential significance to Palestinians, representing both the shattering of the Palestinian community in Palestine and the consolidation of a shared national consciousness."*

11. *Sa'di & Abu-Lughod 2007, p. 3: "For Palestinians, the 1948 War led indeed to a "catastrophe." A society disintegrated, a people dispersed, and a complex and historically changing but taken for granted communal life was ended violently. The Nakba has thus become, both in Palestinian memory and history, the demarcation line between two qualitatively opposing periods. After 1948, the lives of the Palestinians at the individual, community, and national level were dramatically and irreversibly changed."*

12. *Khalidi, Rashid I. (1992). "Observations on the Right of Return". Journal of Palestine Studies.* ***21*** *(2): 29–40.* *doi:10.2307/2537217 (https://doi.org/10.2307%2F2537217) . JSTOR 2537217 (https://www.jstor.org/stable/2537217) . "Only by understanding the centrality of the catastrophe of politicide and expulsion that befell the Palestinian people – al-nakba in Arabic – is it possible to understand the Palestinians' sense of the right of return"*

13. *Ian Black (26 November 2010). "Memories and maps keep alive Palestinian hopes of return" (https://www.theguardian.com/world/2010/nov/26/palestinian-refugees-middle-east-conflict) . The Guardian.*

14. *Ilan Pappé, 2006*

- Masalha, Nur (2008). "Remembering the Palestinian Nakba: Commemoration, Oral History and Narratives of Memory" (https://research.stmarys.ac.uk/id/eprint/27/1/Masalha-N-2008-Remembering-the-Palestinian-Nakba.pdf) (PDF). *Holy Land Studies*. **7** (2): 123–156. doi:10.3366/E147494750800019X (https://doi.org/10.3366%2FE147494750800019X). S2CID 159471053 (https://api.semanticscholar.org/CorpusID:159471053). Project MUSE 255205 (https://muse.jhu.edu/article/255205). Archived (https://web.archive.org/web/20220603115238/https://research.stmarys.ac.uk/id/eprint/27/1/Masalha-N-2008-Remembering-the-Palestinian-Nakba.pdf) (PDF) from the original on 3 June 2022. Retrieved 30 April 2022.